

In Our Own Words

Thoughts on the experience of evacuation and extended separation

Safehavened in the Midwest

"It's important to weigh whether to choose Washington, D.C. or a hometown locale as a safehaven. I chose to go to Nebraska where I had family support. To do this, you must get on well with your extended family. I stayed with my elderly parents until the first 6 months of evacuation turned into an extended separation from post. Living in our own apartment was preferable and I was able to find a flexible landlord, even in the provinces.

With the availability of email, I was in touch with my spouse at post and with the Department of State on any official news items, so I didn't feel I missed anything by living away from Washington, D.C. The Department was mindful to host a few get-togethers for evacuated families and encouraged that groups remain in touch with each other for support. I found that sort of support with email contact, and was able to rely on extended family members for the practical support of moving, assisting my children in registering for local schools (most of my sisters knew the principals of local schools on a first-name basis) and finding doctors and dentists through personal contacts rather than staring at the yellow pages phone book.

Regaining Control:

The major disruption of the evacuation is temporarily surrendering control. Apart from the tension creating the necessity to depart post, families don't want to be taken away from home and spouse and flung back to the States on your own. But it has to be done and slowly you replace that control to your life. What's key is to accept the new reality and make your way within it. Find the living quarters, get the kids in school, figure out the budget and don't be afraid to tell your spouse that the per diem isn't going to cover the living expenses. Put your life on an acceptable track and move forward.

Will the Children Adjust?

Each family is different, but my children very much enjoyed being near family and cousins again. They missed their overseas friends but made new ones at the new school. My children responded to the resettlement as they would when taking up a new post. They don't dwell too much on other children they have left behind, nor do they worry about making new friends in new locations. They live in the present and let me handle the rest. School-wise, they maintained their grades and were valued by classmates because they have traveled a bit of the world and brought their stories to their classrooms in meaningful discussions.

What About Me?

My only complaint was that I couldn't, or rather didn't, work while I was on this separated tour because I didn't want to lose my DOS security clearance. If I had taken a local job, my security clearance would have expired. If I were to return to DOS employment without a current security clearance, another background investigation would be necessary, delaying or eliminating me from future DOS employment opportunities.

Of course there is a lot of regret at being separated. At times there is anger, but no one's to blame. My life has been disrupted, but compared to what's happened to other families worldwide this year, or any year, does my discomfort merit any more regret? It is what it is.

What About Hubby?

The separation is unwanted, but email and telephone keep the kids and us in contact. Advances in automatic banking have kept us solvent. Being in the Midwest had kept the costs down. He's been able to travel home for visits. What has worked best with us is that I am responsible with the budget and he doesn't question my decisions. He trusts me to handle things, and I do. He misses the daily routine as a family and he's losing two years of his children's' lives. That's a big cost. I am a single parent and that's a big responsibility. The up side is that we haven't argued about any part of this separation. Like everything else in the Foreign Service -- it's temporary.

What's the Worst Part of It All?

The worst part of the separation is the feeling of time lost. Time not to have been together. Time not to have been overseas. Time that the children can't regain with a parent. This separation has cost us a lot financially, but I also feel a great loss of having lived two years in a manner not of my choosing.

And the Benefit:

The ability to be two years in an area of extended family was the best part of this separation. The family support was critical to our survival. If you cannot or do not wish to live in an area of extended family, try to locate a place where there is community support (other evacuees)."